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ABSTRACT

By reading fiction designed for adolescents, teachers can learn how to help middle school children to resolve the conflicts characteristic of their lives. Analyses of 23 such books that focused on the ways that 10- to 16-year-old characters cope with a variety of problems and on the roles that adults play in causing or helping to alleviate those problems revealed five generalizations that seemed to hold true in all of the books. The generalizations are: the ways that children cope include the ways that adults cope with what is troubling or confounding: how children cope seems to be only loosely associated with their age and to be independent of their sex, racial or ethnic origins, social or economic status, or dwelling place: "success"--feeling better about oneself, stronger, more capable, more knowledgeable--is linked with all ways of coping: typically, the books show changes in ways that help characters to gain greater control over their lives: and adults who are informed, sensitive, patient, or loving helpers are more often neighbors or strangers than parents or teachers. Indeed, parents often contribute to children's problems and seldom to their solution, and teachers are as likely to add to children's problems as to diminish them. (A list of books that provide examples of ways that 10- to 16-year-old children cope is appended.) (FL)

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Large as Life:

Fiction about How 10-16 Year-old Characters Cope

Nancy C. Millett

Psychologists and professional educators suggest much that teachers can do to help middle school children to resolve the conflicts characteristic in their lives. I want to suggest that teachers who read fiction in addition to (or even instead of) psychology books and case histories and methods texts can help themselves to become better helpers too: more knowledgeable, more sensitive, more patient, more loving. To illustrate what we can learn, I have selected twenty-three works of fiction that focus on the ways that 10-16 year old characters cope with a variety of problems and on the roles that adults play in causing or helping to alleviate those problems.[1] In these books, five generalizations seem to hold true. (1) the ways that kids cope include the ways that adults cope with what is troubling or confounding. (2) How kids cope seems to be only loosely associated with their age, independent of the problem or condition that troubles them, and independent also of their sex, racial or ethnic origins, social or economic status, or dwelling place. (3) "Success"--feeling better about one's self, stronger, more capable, more knowledgeable--is linked with <u>all</u> ways of coping, not just those that we are likely to regard as "more mature." (4) Typically, these books show changes in ways of coping that help characters to gain greater control over

their lives. (5) Adults who are informed, sensitive, patient, or loving helpers are more often neighbors or strangers than parents or teachers; parents very often contribute to kids' problems and seldom to their solution; and teachers, who rarely figure prominently in characters' lives, are as likely to add to kids' problems as to diminish them.

In this fiction, the ways that kids cope range all the way from self-centered behaviors to remarkable expressions of love for others. They include predictable, "immature" behaviors such as feeling sorry for one's self, crying, overeating, pretending to be sick, screaming, banging one's head against the wall, kicking things, and verbally or physically attacking other people, whether or not they are part of the problem. If nothing else, these emotional outbursts help folk to endure until they find more direct ways to cope with their problems. For example, in The Dollar Man 13 year old Marcus, fat and poorly coordinated, habitually confirms his own feelings of weakness by overeating, and in The Ears of Louis, big-eared Louis, a fifth grader, kicks the bed in frustration as efforts to contain his ears with scotch tape or to hide them under a turtleneck pullover fail. Similarly, although he later behaves heroically, Tony, 15, rages at Cindy in Snow Bound when they are first trapped, blaming their plight on her: "You dumb cluck! You stupid female! You crazy bitch!" (p. 45) Sometimes, too, characters who usually cope with their problems in more direct ways also

give vent to their underlying turmoil in emotional outbursts. Thus, in What About Me? before 15 year old Dorrie confronts the terrible ambiguity of her own feelings toward her brother Fredlet, a Mongoloid, and before she understands the toll that taking care of him has exacted from her mother, she sometimes screams at him or at her parents, cries, throws things, or complains to her friends or her art teacher about her parents' inattention to her. Unlike Dorrie, the leading character in Under the Haystack feels that she must hide the real state of affairs from everyone and bear her burden alone. Abandoned by her mother and a man referred to only as him, 13 year old Sandy manages for weeks to care for herself and her 6 and 8 year old sisters, but as the responsibility weighs more and more heavily, she retreats to a hiding place under the haystack where she sometimes rages aloud in frustration or breaks into deep, wracking sobs.

The ways that kids cope with their problems also include various methods of escape or putting up a false front such as pretending to be deaf to taunts, daydreaming, fantasizing, retreating to a hiding place, running away, getting sick, or showing off, defying odds, or flaunting authority. As was the case for the emotional outbursts that we might have predicted for middle school age kids, these relatively self-centered and indirect ways of coping tend to appear early in characters' struggles. In The Unmaking of Rabbit, Paul, 11, at first copes with the cruel jibes of his classmates who

call him "Rabbit" by pretending not to hear them; later, he saves himself from becoming party to a robbery when he remembers an older boy's advice about how to get out of a situation--"Pretend you're gonna puke!" In A Dance to Still Music, pretending to be mute is temporarily effective for Margaret, 14, deaf for over a year as a result of an ear infection; running away is another. In Come to the Edge, dreaming about and telling stories about his father to his friend Skin help both Gravel and his friend to cope with their loneliness and lack of love in the orphanage, but after he hears his father tell the principal that, truth be known, he doesn't want the boy, Gravel runs away and is thereafter very nearly overcome by fits of "greyness" whenever the risk of loving or being loved is imminent. In Trial Valley, daydreaming about what life would be like without being responsible for her 12 year old brother and 7 year old sister is one of the few escapes that 16 year old Mary Call Luther allows herself. Fantasizing about a world where fat is good and thin is "out" is one of several fantasies that help fat Marcus to cope in The Dollar Man. Playing the roles of King and Queen in a world that they invent is a chief source of satisfaction to Jessie, a 10 year old farm boy, and Leslie, a 10 year old newcomer from the big city, as they cope with their need for approval and friendship in Bridge to Terabithia.

A variant of these ways to cope by escaping is putting up a false front, showing off, defying the odds, or flaunting

authority as do 16 year old Manuel and his rival Ernie in Child of Fire. When we first see Manuel, he has jumped into the ring to kneel in front of the gate from which the bull charges into the arena. When we see him last, he kneels defiantly in the path of a mechanical grape picker that will put his people out of work--and he stays there until the machine designed to strip grapes from the vines picks the flesh from his bones.

Most poignant of the ways that kids cope are various "reaching out" behaviors such as admitting and sharing insecurities and uncertainties, risking friendship, accepting help, and sticking up for one's beliefs. As I read scenes about kids who try to cope with their needs in these ways, I re-discovered what I once knew and felt but have since forgotten--or neglected to remember: how tentatively kids sometimes feel about themselves, how severe are their anxieties, how shaky are their certainties, how fragile are their egos, how frightening it is for them to take risks, and how funny some of their efforts to "be somebody" are!

The need for friends or for a best friend is common in real life and in fiction about middle school age youngsters, and often fraught with risks. All It Takes is Patience is typical. Stu, a fifth grader, has a terrible time deciding whether or not to ask other boys if they want to shoot baskets at his house. Finally taking the risk that he will be turned down, he discovers that the new kid welcomes his

friendship, that Robert had been hoping all along that Stu would ask him, and that he already had a friend whom he had ignored--a girl. Felicia, the precocious 8 year old heroine of Felicia the Critic also yearns for friends, but her problem is brashness rather than timidity. In scenes that the reader will find delightfully comic, Felicia corrects the deficiencies of others. She calls the weatherman to correct his temperature reports, jams traffic while trying to give the policeman directions for improving traffic flow, and outlines to the hostess at her cousin's wedding the deficiencies of her seating arrangements, the orchestra, the vocalist, and the sound system. She also answers questions with unblinking candor. "What do you think of my new Concord Grape nail polish?" asks her 13 year old sister. Thoughtfully, Felicia replies, "It looks like blood." Hurt and confused when others reject her, Felicia tries to follow her mother's advice to distinguish between truth and opinion and to use only constructive criticism, but Felicia's timing and method of delivery keep her in hot water until her friends suffer the consequences of letting her join their group only if she refuses to criticize any of their plans.

More evidence that children's struggles to satisfy their needs for friendship can be the stuff of comedy as well as case history is Phillip Hall Likes Me, I Reckon Maybe! In this lively story, 11 year old Beth discovers that Phillip Hall, the cutest, smartest boy in class is "Number One" because she lets him beat her. She switches tactics from

following his orders, gratifying his wishes, and subordinating her own talents to competing with him and, finally, getting him to share their talents in a contest with others, thereby bolstering his ego as well as her own.

How far kids with less stout egos will go to attract attention and gain acceptance is illustrated in The Dollar Man. Eagerly, 13 year old Marcus experiments with a new identity as a fearless oddball. He wears his mother's outrageous hat to school, clowns around in classes, and hangs out with Dorrity and other older boys who drink beer and smoke pot. After he is wrongly found guilty of smoking pot and is expelled from school because his "friends" lie about their own guilt and because he refuses to get them in trouble by giving their names to the superintendent, he discovers something about his own worth--that "he was a person who had principles and stuck up for them, no matter what. He'd been scared at the hearing, but he'd stuck to his ideas, his principles; nobody had made him say something he thought was wrong." (p. 203)

Sticking up for what seems right is also shown in The Hundred Penny Box. In this tender story, young Michael loves to spend time with Aunt Dew, 100, especially when she takes out her battered old box containing one hundred pennies and uses them to tell the history of each year of her life. When Michael's mother threatens to destroy the box, Michael stands up to her, arguing that Aunt Dew has a right to have what she values for her own reasons. In valuing Aunt Dew's history,

Michael also inadvertently shows an instinct rare among the young for the truth that our own identity is inextricably linked with who our people were.

Victoria provides a mixture of the poignant and the comic and shows how difficult it is for kids to reach out for help. A motherless girl whose father is frequently absent, Victoria masks her real feelings of loneliness and alienation and her fear of rejection by bossing around three other 11 year old girls who comprise the total membership of the secret society she leads, called (naturally!) The Victorians. Using The Black Book, a collection of sayings, superstitions and remedies that seem to favor heavily the use of spider-webs, Victoria orchestrates every activity from mealtime and bedtime rituals to midnight forays to graveyard and chapel. Inadvertently she goes too far, and the other girls turn on her. Only after the headmistress explains to the rebels how Victoria really feels and why she feels that way do they reach out to her. In turn, Victoria shows her feelings and reaches out to one of them to be her special friend.

Finally, we see 10-16 year old characters using other-centered, "mature" ways of coping that we adults like to assume most often characterize our own behavior, and that we may too often expect from our children: finding out what is really going on, taking things as they come, using our heads to define problems and think through solutions, doing what must be done whether we like it or not, accepting what can't be changed, and--ultimately--showing care and concern and

love for others.

How valiantly the teenage girls in Trial Valley and Under the Haystack cope with their heavy responsibilities of heading a family has already been alluded to. These and four other books show once again that the ways kids cope seem to be independent of their age, sex, background, living conditions or of the problems they face. Grandma Didn't Wave Back shows 10 year old Debbie learning how to cope with the fact that Grandma is becoming forgetful and confused. At first she wavers between wanting to be with her and wanting to avoid her when she's "ill," but she gradually works her way through her confusion (no thanks to adults who never tell her anything and who force her to hide behind walls to hear what's really going on) and cares for her because she loves her and because this caring makes her feel "more grown up." (p. 49) Listen for the Fig Tree is much stronger stuff, a story about the incredible triumph of a girl's love over loneliness, misery, and violence. Marvina, 16, has been blind since she was 10, but her blindness scarcely seems a handicap as she struggles to make things go right--or at least less wrong--for herself and her grief-crazed mother, driven to despair and alcoholism by the murder of her husband by two other Black men on Christmas Day a year earlier. The friendship of a few neighbors, a preacher, and a young boy help her to survive the terrible realities jammed in her face --but she confronts most of her problems day by day, alone. She shops, cooks and cleans. She tries to get her mother out

of bars before she gets hopelessly drunk and she cleans up her vomit-drenched mother and vomit-slick apartment after her mother passes out. She listens when her mother needs to talk, figures out how to deal with impulsive purchases that they cannot afford, and carries on by herself when her mother backs down on the plans they had made together to celebrate Christmas. With the help of others, she survives the attack of a rapist, emotionally and spiritually, and is able to join in the tumultuous joy of Kwanza--a seven day celebration of first fruits which begins the first minute after midnight on Christmas.

Blue Fin celebrates in a very different way a young man's confrontations with harsh realities. In this rousing adventure about tuna fishing off the coast of Australia, 14 year old Snook, a thin, gangling boy, wants desperately to gain the confidence of his father, a brooding, sour man who often says, in the boy's presence, that Snook is good for nothing, a financial burden, and bad luck. All it takes to change the man's mind are Snook's exploits after a waterspout washes the Blue Fin's crew overboard, severely injures his father, and heavily damages the boat. Snook shuts off a lethal leak of ammonia, tends to his father, pumps out tons of water by hand, poles thirteen tons of thirty pound tuna from one holding tank to another so as to balance the boat, repairs a broken fuel line, plots the course home, pilots the Blue Fin triumphantly into port, and helps to save his father's life when the fuel runs out at the last and waves

drive the boat onto the rocks where it is smashed to bits. But Snook is happy because at long last his father brags about him: "Oh, he don't look it, but he's a tiger, that boy. By God, he's a tiger!" (p. 242) So much for romance.

Utterly believable, however, is the way that Robbie and his father come to reach out to each other in love. In There Are Two Kinds of Terrible, 12 year old Robbie learns to cope with the kind of terrible that has an end, like the eight days he spent in a hospital with a painfully broken arm, and the kind of terrible that never ends--the illness, long hospitalization, and death of his beloved mother. Complicating his efforts to cope with his grief is the terrible contrast between his close and easy companionship with his mother and his remoteness from his father. In fact, they are little more than strangers whose communication has been restricted to his father's ritualistic questions ("Good day?" "How's school?" "How's your pal Jud?") and Robbie's ritualistic replies ("OK." "Fine." "Swell.") Things change after Robbie discovers a picture album under his Dad's bed pillow and gets a jolt of understanding: he has lost a dear mother; his Dad has lost a lifetime mate. Unsure about how to talk to his father, Robbie writes a note:

> "Dear Dad: I made your bed because I love you and we're all each other has and we should try to make things better for each other and not worse.
>
> Your son, Robbie.
>
> P.S. Another thing I was thinking, Dad. There's

no use putting the past in front of you." (pp. 126-127)

Unsure about how to talk to his son, his Dad writes a note too:

"Dear Robbie: Thank you for your love. And thank you for your wisdom. Your words have helped me very much.

Dad." (p. 129)

It is not hard to believe that a child can sometimes lead us, but the notes that Robbie and his father exchange did prompt me to take a closer look at the roles that adults do play in kids' lives. In five of the twenty-three books to which I have referred, adults play no significant role. In sixteen books, they are part of the problems that kids face, and in all sixteen, they are parents. In only two books do adults play exclusively positive roles, and in only one of these is an adult a major character.

The absence of parents often poses problems for kids, whether through death, desertion or occupational choice. In Two Kinds of Terrible, Victoria, and Trial Valley, children's problems flow directly from the death of one or both parents. In Under the Haystack, the mother abandons her children to run away with "him." In Taking Sides, the parents divorce. In The Dollar Man, the parents separate before their son is born, and the mother strives for thirteen years to keep her son from learning his father's identity. In Victoria and in

Two Kinds of Terrible the fathers are so often away on business and take so little of their time at home to share with their children that they and their children are strangers.

Often, too, parents cause problems because they are so preoccupied with their own troubles that they cannot see or have no energy left to cope with what troubles their children; or because they underestimate their children; or because they are shallow, selfish, bullying, weak, or indifferent.

Some of these parents do deserve sympathy, though. It would be heartless to excoriate the emotionally dependent, grief-stricken widow in Listen for the Fig Tree or the hard-working widower in Two Kinds of Terrible, and it is not hard to feel concern for the mothers in A Dance to Still Music and The Hundred Penny Box. One is harried, over-worked, lonely, and guilt-stricken because she didn't realize that her daughter's ear infection was serious enough to make her deaf. The other resents the time that her son spends with Aunt Dew and is frustrated by Aunt Dew's indifference to her, even though she is the one who feeds and nurses this 100 year old stranger in her home. The fact that these parents do not intend to bring stress and conflict into the lives of their children does not remove the fact that they do, but even their children seem to sense their parents' needs and to sympathize with them.

Less easy to sympathize with are those parents who underestimate or lack confidence in their children--and who

show it. In Grandma Didn't Wave Back, Debbie's parents do little or nothing to help their 10 year old daughter to understand what is happening when Grandma slips more often, more deeply, and more strangely into the past, and they do not take her into family discussions about "the problem." Fearful and confused, she is left to figure things out for herself, and figure them out she does: "putting Grandma away" really means that they want her dead and buried. Debbie discovers some simple and direct ways to show that she loves Grandma, thereby coping herself and giving Grandma what she needs most, but she discovers these largely alone.

Even harder to understand are parents like those in Blue Fin. The father's harsh criticism and incessant bad-mouthing of his son would be enough to destroy a boy with less stout an ego or more blind a need to please, and the mother's failure to interfere in any other way to support her son suggests timidity at least, indifference at worst.

In Bridge to Terabithia, Deenie, and in The Unmaking of Rabbit, parents also seem indifferent to what their children themselves want and need. In Bridge to Terabithia, Jessie wishes that his father would hug him the way that he hugs his sisters, but all he gets are orders to do things and scant praise for having done them. He hides from both parents the fact that he loves to draw, because he fears being labeled a sissy, and he is reluctant to bring his best friend home with him because he fears his family's jibes about having a girl-friend. Only after Jessie explodes in grief over Leslie's

death does his father seek the boy out, following him when he runs blindly through the woods, then picking him up, holding him, and carrying him home. Deenie's mother seems even more self-centered, selfish, and callous. She constantly pushes Deenie into applying for jobs as a model, something Deenie herself doesn't really want to do, and when a doctor tells Deenie that she must wear a heavy brace for four years to correct a spinal defect, her mother seems more concerned about the frustration of her own plans than with Deenie's struggle to cope with her condition. In The Unmaking of Rabbit, Paul, 11, continues to wait for the mother who left him with Grandma when he was 2. She promises to send for him when she is more settled, when she has a bigger apartment, after she gets married, etc., etc., etc. After she promises to spend a weekend with him doing whatever he wants to do and instead parks him for hours in a loud and smelly bar while she and her new husband and everyone else ignore him, her colossal indifference finally comes through to him and he is ironically free to stop waiting for her and to show his love to someone who really loves him. In The Dollar Man, when Marcus meets his father, the man fobs him off with a meal, a forty dollar watch, and a twenty dollar bill. Marcus shows how deeply the man's utter lack of interest cuts him when he leaves the watch and the bill on the bus that he takes back home to his mother. And in Come to the Edge, Gravel's father dumps him in an orphanage and leaves him there for four years, where the boy waits and hopes for his return until he

hears his father say that he won't take him out of the orphanage because he doesn't want him.

But parents aren't the only ones who cause problems for children. The assistant principal and the superintendent in The Dollar Man don't really like kids, don't trust Marcus to be truthful when he denies having smoked pot, don't understand or respect his refusal to identify the real culprits, and use their authority and the weight of the system's bureaucracy to bully Marcus and to try to intimidate his mother.

Adults do play positive roles and parents are among those who help their children to cope with their problems, but not often, and not significantly. In fact, only one book features a parent who is so positive a force in his son's life that the boy is able to face his father's death and assume his role as head of the family when he is only 13. This book is A Day No Pigs Would Die. Understated, unsentimental, it testifies to the power of shared work, a shared faith, trust, and love. It shows a boy trusting his father so much that he helps his father to kill his pet hog Pinky. After the killing, heartbroken and sobbing with his head up and his eyes closed, "hoping God would hear it," Rob feels his father's hand touch his face:

> "His hand was rough and cold, and as I opened my eyes to look at it, I could see that his knuckles were dripping with pig blood. It was the hand that just butchered Pinky. He did it. Because

> he had to. Hated to and had to. And he knew that he'd never have to say to me that he was sorry. His hand against my face, trying to wipe away my tears, said it all. His cruel pigsticking fist with its thick fingers so lightly on my cheek." (p. 129)

It shows a father trusting his son so much that he tells him that he knows he is going to die, and not to tell his mother or Aunt Carrie, and trusting him also to run the farm and to take care of them.

Teachers are shown in positive roles too, although only three times. The art teacher takes Jessie, the kid who secretly likes to draw, to the National Gallery and to the Smithsonian in Bridge to Terabithia: the headmistress helps three 11 year old girls to understand and accept their roommate in Victoria; and Guntzie, an art teacher in What About Me? who is also a neighbor, listens to Dorrie when she is feeling neglected by her parents or imposed upon by her retarded brother, puts her to work rather than give her sympathy, and takes her into her own home after her brother dies, her mother has a nervous breakdown, and her parents move away from New York.

Neighbors and strangers come off best as adults who help kids. They figure prominently in the lives of children in four books, less prominently in two. Whatever the degree of their contribution to kids who are trying to cope, they share certain attributes, and it should come as no surprise that

they are the attributes of loving persons. Some are "open" kinds of people, like the frail and inarticulate man who tries to beat off the rapist who attacks blind Marvina in Listen for the Fig Tree. Some are people who may even be thought to help others because they need something in return, like the adults in Come to the Edge who take runaway Gravel Winter into their lives. Mr. Gant, nearly sightless, houses Gravel in return for using Gravel as his eyes. Mrs. Prior, lame, feeds him to fetch and step for her. Miss Ethel, all but deaf, shows care for him in order to be heard and sometimes to hear a voice. Best of all helpers are those like Mr. Paynter who is himself whole. Alone among the adults in Gravel's life, this man trusts Gravel to find his own way into accepting love, showing it, and finding what it is that he needs to be and wants to do.

Like Paynter, the character who most epitomizes a loving adult in the books I read is not a parent, not a teacher, not a neighbor. It is a stranger. In A Dance to Still Music 14 year old Margaret runs away when her mother decides to marry Ed, not because she resents Ed but because she senses how much her deafness troubles her mother and, as she puts it, to give her mother and Ed a chance to "make a go" of their marriage. After she writes a friend in Maine to tell her that she's coming back from Florida to live in her Grandfather's house, she hitches a ride on a pickup going north, but when the driver hits a small deer and leaves it to die, she jumps off to help. Josie, who works as a maid at a nearby motel,

finds Margaret and the deer and takes them with her to her houseboat. During the next several weeks, we see what Josie does--and does not do--that helps Margaret to risk speaking for the first time in over a year, to risk going alone to stores, to risk venturing alone along strange coastlines and forest paths, and to risk leaving her newly found security to attend a workshop for the deaf. What Josie does is to let her eat, sit, look, think, and sleep in peace; show her only --and then, indirectly--what she needs to know in order to take care of her needs when she's alone; play with her when they swim together; express gratitude for Margaret's unsolicited small services; and surprise and delight at her gifts. She shares her gifts too--enjoying the deaf girl's pleasure in being able to dance to the still music she plays. What Josie does not do is prod Margaret with questions; predict her responses when she does ask; make judgments when she gets an answer; tell her what she ought to do or think or feel or what she ought not to do or think or feel, or blame her for what she does feel, think, and do. In short, she accepts Margaret, shares with her, trusts her, and has confidence in her ability to cope with what is in her heart and what is "out there." Because Josie loves Margaret for her own sake, she helps her to cope, and can leave her to cope.

Maybe the reason more of us don't get that far before we have to let our own kids go is that we aren't as grown-up as Josie is. Maybe we aren't able to see that we are much more like children than we like to think, and that children are

much more capable than we like to admit. Maybe fiction about how kids cope and how we figure in their problems can help us to help them. It can, of course, if we recognize that we may be among those who most need the help it offers.

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[1] In selecting books, I relied heavily, but not exclusively on Diana L. Spirt, Introducing More Books: A Guide for the Middle Grades, R. R. Bowker and Co., N.Y., 1978. This selection aid arranges books according to the developmental goals of middle childhood (ages 8-15), recommends books according to their literary quality as well as their popularity with young readers, includes books for different reading levels, and emphasizes books copyrighted since 1970. My particular selections include those with girls as well as boys in major roles, members of various cultural and ethnic groups, contemporary small town and rural as well as urban settings, and the affluent as well as middle-class or lower-class. I have deliberately omitted books that focus on the problems of children's mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, pre-marital sex, abortion, marriage and/or parenthood.

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